

COPE Seminar Addresses Research Integrity, Future of Indexing

Elizabeth Slade

COPE, the Committee on Publication Ethics, held its annual seminar on 10 March 2006. COPE was founded in 1997 and is a forum for editors of peer-reviewed journals to discuss issues related to the integrity of the scientific record.¹ The annual seminar is an opportunity for editors to learn from each other's experience of ethical problems faced in journal publishing.

Research Integrity

The seminar started with Michael Farthing, of the University of London, discussing the UK's forthcoming Panel for Research Integrity. COPE has played a key role in setting up the panel, which was due to be launched in spring 2006. Farthing said that it would be responsible for promoting models of good practice in biomedical research and that it would assist in investigations of research misconduct.

Vedran Katavic, of Zagreb University School of Medicine, then spoke about his experience on the *Croatian Medical Journal* as editor for research integrity and about the journal's work in tackling fraud in publication. The journal has worked to educate authors and medical students in good practices in writing and publishing.

Animal Research

David Katz, professor of immunopathology at University College London and editor of the *International Journal of Experimental Pathology*, and David Morton, professor of biomedical science and ethics at the University of Birmingham, in a session chaired by publications consultant Elizabeth Wager, discussed editors' roles in upholding standards of animal research. In the UK, the Nuffield Council on Bioethics

gives guidelines on animal research and on how its output should be monitored. Guidelines are set on whether and how animals can be used in particular studies, but at present no recommendation is made on publication of these studies.

Morton explained how the treatment of animals can have a critical effect on a study's results. For example, animals can react differently to drugs depending on whether they have been allowed to acclimatize to their surroundings. Full details of the husbandry, environment, and health of animals are rarely given but would enable other researchers to repeat earlier methods more accurately. Editors could ask authors for a dedicated "Animals" section, in addition to "Methods".

Morton argued that editors are standard-setters when it comes to publication of research involving animals. Scientists would be forced to ensure that their standards of animal research were up to scratch if journals refused to publish studies that did not meet their criteria. The problem is that there are no internationally recognized guidelines on standards of animal research.

It was suggested that COPE could have a role in developing such guidelines for editors on what is and is not acceptable in animal research—namely, that research should not cause more suffering than is necessary to reach the biomedical end point.

Other steps that editors can take are giving reviewers guidance on looking at animal methods, choosing referees with knowledge on animal methods, and, as an educational aid to authors, publishing an annual list of reasons for manuscript rejection so that problems can be avoided in the future.

Massaging Impact Factors

Pritpal S Tamber, editor and publisher of *BMJ International Editions*, and Tim

Albert, principal of Tim Albert Training, debated whether it was acceptable for journal editors to "massage" their impact factors—to use techniques with the sole intention of raising the impact factor, such as requiring authors to include a particular number of references from the journal before their manuscript will be published. Impact factors, measures of how many citations journals receive, are calculated by Thomson ISI and published annually in its *Journal Citation Report*. They are widely used as an indication of a journal's quality and by funding bodies to determine the importance of a researcher's work.

Tamber argued that it was wrong for editors to massage impact factors because editors are relied on to maintain the integrity of an author's work and of the scientific record. Taking steps to increase an impact factor undermines that integrity and means that editors are no longer acting in the interests of their readers and authors. A great deal of the academic publication process relies on trust between editors, authors, and referees, and editors should not act in a way that undermines this trust.

Albert countered that argument by pointing out that many other activities could be classified as "massaging". Inviting high-profile authors to submit their work, changing article types so that only the most citable articles are counted toward the impact factor, not accepting sound articles that are less likely to be cited, and releasing important research to the press could all be seen as steps taken to increase an impact factor—steps that many editors take without question. His final message was that if all editors massage impact factors, then the playing field is level.

Both participants, and other delegates in the discussion that followed, commented on the flaws of the impact factor and on the dangers of relying on it for such things as academic funding decisions and judgments on quality of research institutes.

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The delegates voted on the motion and overwhelmingly supported the motion that massaging of impact factors by journal editors is wrong.

New Indexing Services

Researchers rely on indexing services for finding research, identifying the most important work, following citations backward and forward through time, and identifying the best journals. Matthew Cockerill, publisher of BioMed Central, gave an overview of some of these services.

Cockerill said that Thomson ISI's Web of Science,² as one of the most well-established

services, has huge journal coverage but weaknesses, such as expense of subscription. He said the misleading nature of journal-level metrics, such as the impact factor, has led to the rise of alternatives.

Online publication of research allows indexing services to pull together information in a more advanced way than has previously been possible. Cockerill said that such services as Google Scholar³ have the potential to be more up to date than the traditional services and, inasmuch as they are automated, can be completely free to use. Editors need to be aware of innovations in indexing, in that the many

new indexing services will change how authors and readers find and use published research. 

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